

A LESSON IN ENGLISH



In his autobiography (*The Summing up*) Somerset Maugham tells how he was given an English lesson rather late in life. He had just engaged as a temporary secretary a shy and rather pretty young girl. One Saturday he asked her to be good enough to take home the typescript of one of his novels and correct it over the week-end. Of course he meant her only to make a note of mistakes in spelling that the typist might have made.

When she brought back the typescript on Monday morning it was accompanied by four sheets of corrections. I must confess that at the first glance I was a trifle vexed; but then I thought that it would be silly of me not to profit, if I could, by the trouble she had taken and so sat me down to examine them.

I suppose the young woman had taken a course at a secretarial college and she had gone through my novel in the same methodical way as her masters had gone through her essays. The remarks that filled the four neat pages were incisive and severe. I could not but surmise that the professor of English at the secretarial college did not mince matters. He took a marked line, there could be no doubt about that; and he did not allow that there might be two opinions about anything. His apt pupil would have nothing to do with a preposition at the end of a sentence. A mark of exclamation betokened her disapproval of a colloquial phrase. She had a feeling that you must not use the same word twice on a page and she was ready every time with a synonym to put in its place. If I had indulged myself in the luxury of a sentence of ten lines, she wrote: "Clarify this. Better break it up into two or more periods." When I had availed myself of the pleasant pause that is indicated by a semicolon, she noted: "A full stop;" and if I had ventured upon a colon she remarked stingingly: "Obsolete." But the harshest stroke of all was her comment on what I thought was rather a good joke: "Are you sure of your facts?" Taking it all in all I am bound to conclude that the professor at her college would not have given me very high marks.

W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing up*.

Exercises

A) Questions. — 1. When did Somerset Maugham's secretary go through his typescript and why? — 2. Why was not the novelist pleased with the result? — 3. Give the list of punctuation marks in English. — 4. Why did the secretary ask that periods should, be broken up? — 5. How can you see that the girl did not understand what she read?

B) Faire des phrases avec : — 1. To profit by. — 2. To go through an essay. — 3. To avail oneself of. — 4. To be bound to. — 5. Nothing to do with.

C) Placer autrement les prépositions : — 1. She wrote the corrections that he profited by. — 2. Here are the essays through which I should have gone yesterday. — 3. Which college did you go to? — 4. This is a punctuation mark that I disapprove of. — 5. Do you know the luxury I have indulged myself in?

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1. Mary was taking a **course** [kɔ:s] of English in a school. Her English teacher, Mrs. Eliot, took the essays home to **correct** them **over** (during) the week-end. Mary was somewhat surprised to find that, although an **apt** pupil, she had not got very high marks. Mrs. Eliot **had gone through** her essay in a methodical [mi'θɔdi kəl] way, writing **harsh** (cruel, unpleasant to read) and **stinging** (a bee stings) comments ['kɔments] in the **margin** of her six sheets of paper.

Whenever Mary had **indulged herself** in the **luxury** ['lʌkʃəri] (allowed herself the pleasure) of an archaic phrase (expression), there was the word "**obsolete**" ['ɒbsoli:t] (not now in use) and a mark of exclamation to **betoken** [bi'tɔukən] (as a **token**, or sign of) **disapproval** [disə'pru:vəl] (to show that she disapproved of it). Every time Mary had **availed herself** [ə'veild hə:'self] (taken advantage, made use) of a convenient but rather familiar word, the remark was "**colloquial**" [kə'loukwɪəl] (used in speaking, not in writing). Mrs. Eliot **took a marked line** (followed a strict line of conduct), and did not **mince** [mins] **matters**. (To mince meat is to cut it into very small pieces; "not to mince matters" is to tell the plain truth, with no precautions).

When Mary had **ventured** ['ventʃəd] **upon** (bravely taken the risk of) a long period, the red ink said, "**Clarify** ['klærɪfaɪ] this, break it up into shorter sentences." The teacher had not overlooked the smallest **trifle** [traɪfl] (a thing of small importance or value). Although a trifle (somewhat) **vexed** (irritated) Mary thought she had better read the remarks carefully and **profit** ['prɒfɪt] **by** them if she could.

2. The author's copy of a book for the **printer** is the **manuscript** ['mænʃuskript]; if typewritten it is the **typescript** ['taɪpskript]. — I am bound to admit (I have to admit) that the prisoner was bound (tied, fastened) to a chair. — To **surmise** [sə:'maɪz] : to make a guess. — to **summarize** ['sʌməraɪz] = to give a summary ['sʌməri].

3. **Autobiography** [ˌɔ:təbaɪ'ɒgrəfi] — **temporary** ['tempərəri] — to **examine** [ɪg'zæmɪn] — **synonym** ['sɪnənɪm] — to **indicate** ['ɪndɪkeɪt] — **incisive** [ɪn'saɪsɪv] — **severe** [si'viə] — **Somerset Maugham** ['sʌməsɪt 'mɔ:m] — **secretarial** [ˌsekɾə'tɛəriəl] — **college** ['kɒlɪdʒ].